

Town of



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AMHERST *Massachusetts*

Select Board

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March 5, 2012

Senator Stephen Brewer, Chair, Senate Committee on Ways and Means
State House - Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Brian S. Dempsey, Chair, House and Ways and Means
State House - Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

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Dear Most Honorable Senator Brewer and Representative Dempsey:

As you weigh the very real and competing priorities for State spending in yet another year of economic malaise, we urge you to *think local*: please increase the Governor's proposed Unrestricted General Government Aid amount by \$65 million now, rather than planning to distribute those anticipated funds in the fall. For cities and towns, the difference between being able to plan for those dollars in our base budget versus receiving them as a supplemental appropriation later is the difference between stabilizing and destabilizing municipal service delivery.

With all the changes and challenges we have endured, to maintain stability now is critical.

These four years have been an economic wake-up call, and in Amherst, we have dug deep and made big changes to restore fiscal sustainability. To reduce expenses, we have:

- Cut our municipal workforce by 12%, with additional cuts to the school workforce;
- Controlled health care costs through significant plan design changes and increased employee contributions, with the support of our employee groups;
- Closed one of our four beloved elementary schools;
- Negotiated responsible and fair collective bargaining agreements;
- Achieved real gains through energy efficiency.

Cutting costs couldn't bridge the whole gap though, so we have also increased revenue, by:

- Adopting the meals tax and expanded lodging tax – approved by UNANIMOUS vote of our Town Meeting as soon as you made that available to us – Thank you!
- Passing a Proposition 2 ½ Override in 2010, to protect core services;
- Increasing ambulance fees and other appropriate user fees.

We have come so far in Amherst, using every tool available to us, but many challenges remain. If you have reasonable confidence of that \$65 million becoming available, you would make an enormous difference for cities and towns across the Commonwealth by incorporating that into our local aid

allocation. Jobs will be kept. Services will be maintained. For Amherst, that would mean about \$500,000, and would help us close a big gap in our school budget. The alternative is more cuts, and those aren't restorations that could be made with a supplemental appropriation in October, because that's not how the school year and school budgets work. For stability, that money needs to be available up front.

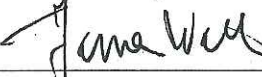
Of course, we hope you will find a way to increase funding for Chapter 70, Special Ed Circuit Breaker, Chapter 90, PILOT and so much more, and we would support and greatly appreciate those increases. But Unrestricted General Government Aid is where communities have the most flexibility to address our needs and priorities in every budget category.

We thank you for your care and diligence on these matters, and for your service to the people of Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

Amherst Select Board


Stephanie O'Keeffe, Chair


James Wald


Diana Stein


Alisa Brewer


Aaron Hayden

cc: Governor Deval Patrick, State House - Room 280, Boston, MA 02133
Senator Stanley C. Rosenberg, State House - Rm. 320, Boston, MA 02133
Representative Ellen Story, State House - Room 277, Boston, MA 02133